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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000890

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [EAID](#) [PTER](#) [KIRF](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: KUMARATUNGA GIVES STRONG INDICATION SHE WILL GO FORWARD WITH JOINT MECHANISM ON TSUNAMI RELIEF

REF: COLOMBO 888

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey J. Lunstead for reason 1.4 (d).

11. (C) Summary. President Kumaratunga told the Ambassador May 13 that she is determined to go ahead with the joint mechanism despite opposition from coalition partner JVP although the process will take a few more weeks. The Ambassador stated that the U.S. supported her efforts and that a signed mechanism would indicate to Washington and other interested capitals that there was still a viable peace process in Sri Lanka worth supporting. The President reiterated her strong opposition to anti-conversion legislation and seemed to convey a more flexible position on the coastal exclusion zone in tsunami-affected areas. She will visit Atlanta in early June. There is understandable concern in many quarters about the President's sincerity on the joint mechanism but her statement of intention to the Ambassador was quite clear. End Summary

12. (C) After several false starts during the week, the Ambassador and DCM (notetaker) called on Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga (CBK) the evening of May 13. CBK was accompanied by Peace Secretariat chief Jayantha Dhanapala, Foreign Secretary

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Palihakarra and Presidential advisor Ram Manikalingam.

Joint Mechanism at "Good Point;" GSL Determined to "Go Ahead"

13. (C) CBK started by telling the Ambassador that she had been looking forward to briefing the U.S. on the progress of the joint mechanism for tsunami relief in the North and the East. She characterized the situation as being at a "good point," with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) having agreed to the mechanism and eight of her nine coalition partners also on board with it. She described the mechanism to the Ambassador as a "simple administrative arrangement" in which three tiers of bodies would identify and recommend projects in the tsunami-affected areas of the North and East. The projects then would be implemented through the "usual government structure" although the bodies created under the mechanism would also "monitor" implementation. The mechanism would cover a two kilometer deep strip of coastline in six districts.

14. (C) CBK said the advantages of going forward with the mechanism were especially important regarding the LTTE. For the first time, the LTTE would agree to work "within the sovereignty of a unified Sri Lanka" although the word "sovereignty" would not appear in the text. Moreover, by signing, the LTTE would "come into a process with the government" which could set a useful precedent for the larger peace process. (CBK clarified that although the joint mechanism technically was not part of the peace process, its signing would obviously have tremendous implications for the peace process.) Finally, CBK noted, by signing the joint mechanism, the LTTE would commit itself "for the first time" to working "on par" with Muslim communities in the North and East. For all of these reasons, CBK stated, the government is "determined to go ahead."

15. (C) Turning to the one coalition partner opposing the joint mechanism, CBK said the JVP's behavior was to be expected. (She noted that the LTTE had delayed agreement on the mechanism for eight and a half weeks while they traveled abroad and that she had only begun to build support for it within her government coalition after Norwegian FM Peterson had told her on April 29 that the LTTE was on board. "I couldn't discuss the specifics with my partners until I knew exactly what the LTTE had agreed to." CBK claimed she had cleared her schedule after the May Day holiday so that she could devote her energies to the joint mechanism.) She said she is still talking to the JVP. Asked by the Ambassador if the JVP might come around, CBK said there was "some chance" but that there was "not too much hope." CBK said that if the JVP continues to be an obstacle, the government has (unspecified) "options."

16. (C) Asked about Muslim reaction to the mechanism, CBK

said they were "hung up on equal representation" at all levels but she had pointed out to them that Muslims would have a significant proportion of the seats at the district level. She accused the opposition UNP of duplicity regarding the joint mechanism, claiming that opposition leader Ranil Wickremesinghe had supported the concept early on but that his "badly divided" party was now backing away and had refused to even come in for a briefing. (CBK said she had just received a letter from Ranil which she planned to read over the weekend.) CBK concluded her comments on the joint mechanism by declaring, "it will take a few weeks but I am determined to do it."

U.S. View

17. (C) The Ambassador told CBK that the U.S. was impressed with her efforts on the joint mechanism and hoped she succeeded. The U.S. had not made its support public for fear of encouraging the JVP public line that the joint mechanism is being foisted on Sri Lanka by foreigners (CBK nodded: "You were right in that.") The Ambassador said the U.S. saw the joint mechanism as a tremendously significant confidence building measure with positive implications for the larger peace process. He noted that he had been asked repeatedly about the joint mechanism during his recent trip to Washington, an indication of the tremendous interest there in concrete progress on the peace front. The Ambassador told CBK it was necessary to maintain movement on the peace process, "to keep something happening to lead to progress." Otherwise, the U.S. and other countries committed to a lasting peace in Sri Lanka could conclude that no progress was possible under the current political constellation. Signing the joint mechanism would be a good indicator that all sides in Sri Lanka were willing to take "positive steps." CBK said she was "fully aware" of this and agreed that the joint mechanism had tremendous implications for the peace process.

18. (C) The Ambassador told CBK that earlier in the day, during his press conference to announce the signing of the tsunami supplemental, he had been asked if the signing of

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the joint mechanism was a "pre-condition" for the "release" of U.S. funds for tsunami reconstruction, a claim that had been bandied about in the press recently. He had clarified that this was not the case, but that he had also stated clearly that the U.S. hoped the mechanism would go forward. The Ambassador said he would also make that clear at the upcoming Development Forum in Kandy.

CBK and CNN

19. (C) Turning to other issues, CBK said she had just decided to accept an invitation to give a keynote address at the 25 year anniversary of CNN in Atlanta on June 1. The Ambassador commented that it would be a particularly valuable trip and a much more interesting speech if she had signed the joint mechanism before she went (CBK smiled). CBK said she planned to arrive in Atlanta on May 31, would stay 2-3 days and did not plan to go elsewhere in the U.S. CBK continued, however, that she would be pleased to stop in Washington to see President Bush but she assumed the timing was too short to get on his calendar. The Ambassador said that was probably the case but he would relay her interest to Washington.

Coastal Zones

110. (C) The Ambassador told CBK that during A/S Rocca's recent visit, she had visited tsunami-ravaged Kalmunai in the East. CBK interjected that she (CBK) had not realized the severity of the land shortage in Kalmunai ("a thin strip of land between the sea and the marshes") and said the GSL had come up with a plan to protect the shore there by "putting sand dunes in the sea" and then allowing construction of shelter between 100 and 200 meters inland, rather than insisting on the original 200 meter exclusion zone. The Ambassador noted that Kalmunai was not the only tsunami area where greater flexibility on land usage was

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needed. He briefed CBK on the upcoming Embassy-arranged DVC between U.S. and Sri Lankan coastal management experts. CBK was enthusiastic and suggested some names for participation.

Anti-Conversion Legislation: "Not During My Tenure"

111. (C) The Ambassador advised CBK that during his trip to Washington the issue of pending anti-conversion legislation in Sri Lanka had come up repeatedly, an indication of how

seriously the issue is viewed in the United States. CBK described the JHU bill as "absolutely stupid" and said that her own government's bill had been passed by Cabinet while she was away. She then stated: "It will not happen during my tenure as President." Palihakarra and Dhanapala commented that the recently-concluded visit of UN Special Rapporteur Asma Jahangir had been extremely timely and her public criticism of anti-conversion legislation very helpful. CBK concluded that even if anti-conversion legislation passed Parliament, she would use the "powers of the President" to prevent it from becoming law.

Comment

12. (C) Obviously fatigued, CBK clearly has been putting significant effort into building support for the joint mechanism. As noted in reftel, there is understandable pessimism in many circles that she will either abandon the effort after the Kandy development forum or sign it for the political boost but then let implementation lag. Until proven wrong, however, we need to take her at her word, clearly stated to the Ambassador, that she is planning to go forward on the joint mechanism. The next few weeks clearly will be fascinating for all "Chandrika watchers." On other issues, it was very interesting that she beat us to the punch on the shortage of available land for tsunami resettlement in Kalmunai (she gave the impression that she had never been there until after the tsunami) and did not disagree with our broader point on the need for greater flexibility on the coastal exclusion zone in all tsunami-affected areas. Finally, her personal opposition and commitment to stopping anti-conversion legislation could not have been more clearly stated. End Comment.
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